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SECTIONALISM IN KENTUCKY FROM 1855 TO 1865¹

Sectionalism in Kentucky is a subject that might be treated in many different ways. It is the purpose of this paper to confine the discussion to the political sentiment of the population as it crystalized in election returns, both national and state, during the decade from 1855 to 1865. This particular period is a significant one to the student of American history, because it includes the civil war issues and likewise marks a transition from the political alignment that prevailed in the preceding decades to that which has continued up to the present time. This theme involves a brief outline of party action in Kentucky during these important ten years, with especial attention to the grouping of political sentiment on the basis of interests that arise from the physical features of the country.

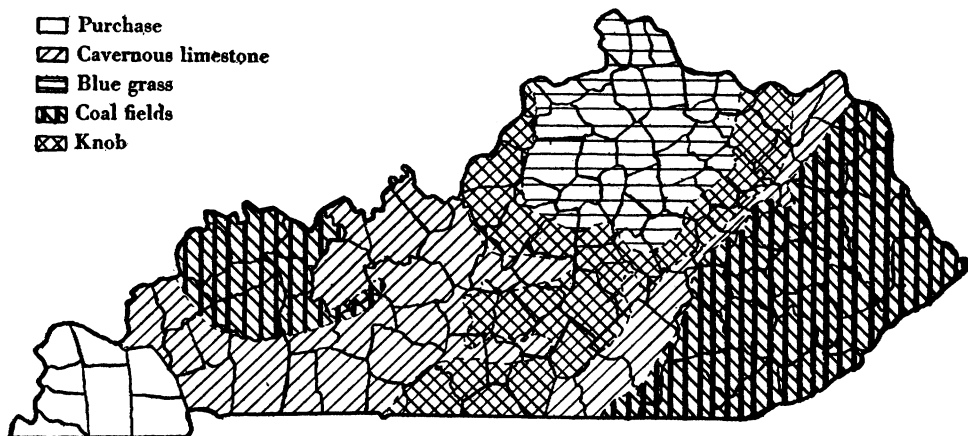
Kentucky is rich in diversity of natural features and its very complexity makes a study of this kind more difficult in this case than it would be in reference to some other states. The well known popular division of the state into "blue grass, pennyroyal, mountain, and purchase" is useful for some purposes but it fails to draw important distinctions in soil that are necessary to our study and it is more scientific and more accurate to make six divisions, more closely allied to the geological formations of the state.

The first division is the blue grass land with its brown surface loam on a bed of limestone, hard and deep. (See map no. 1.) The second division is the knob land, named from the prevalence of sand stone knobs that have been left in the process of erosion. Its soil is mostly clay on a bed of shale and it is the poorest land in the state. The third division is the cavernous limestone land, with a soil better than that of the knob land and poorer than that of the blue grass, capable of good productivity. The limestone bed is softer than that of the blue grass and is honey-

¹ This paper was read before a joint meeting of the American historical association and the Mississippi valley historical association, Cincinnati, Ohio, December 29, 1916.

combed with caves in many places, a characteristic from which its name is derived. The fourth and fifth divisions include the coal fields of Kentucky; they are hilly and rugged in character, especially in the eastern part of the state. The sixth and last division is known as the "purchase," and is located at the extreme western end of the state, between the Tennessee river and the Mississippi. It is level, in the main, with a sandy and clay soil of considerable fertility.

PHYSICAL FEATURES-SOILS

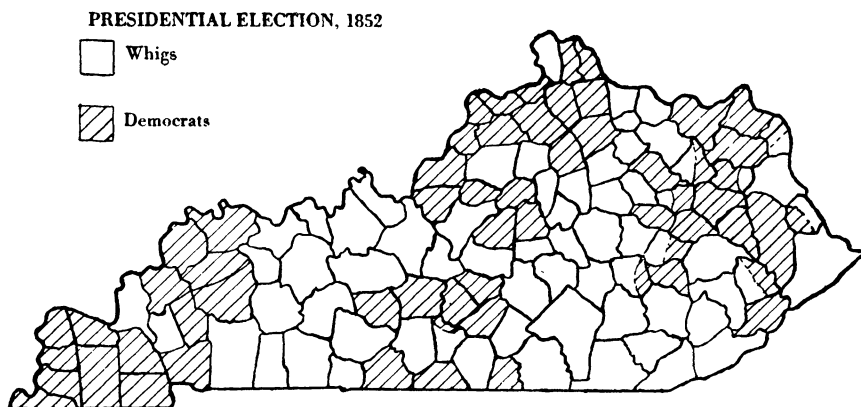


MAP No. 1

The lines of division are not so clearly marked as the above description would indicate, for there are areas of excellent land in the section that are poor in the main; and thin-soiled hills occur in the richest portions of the state. Individual counties, moreover, in many cases exhibit a diversity within their own boundaries which is reflected in the political sentiment.

Before considering the decade of our choice, it will be interesting to notice for a moment, for the purpose of comparison, the grouping of party sentiment in the presidential election of 1852. (See map no. 2.) This was the last campaign in which the whigs, as an organization, took part. It resulted in a victory for their candidate in Kentucky, but the majority for Scott was so small that it must be regarded as prophetic of the decline and fall of the historic whig party in that state.

From a sectional point of view, this first test of the relation-



MAP No. 2

ship of political sentiment and the soil is significant. It is apparent that the whig party predominated in the richer soils of the blue grass and the cavernous limestone while the democratic party controlled in the thinner lands of the knob country and the coal fields of the west and the east. It is not possible to say that the relation is exact for the great party that had grown up under the leadership of Clay was not to be held strictly within sectional boundaries; nor can it be said that the principles of democracy held sway only in the poorer and more remote parts of the state, especially since democracy was vitally changing in character in the fifties.

The election of 1855, the first of the decade under consideration, was a contest for the governorship of the state between Charles S. Morehead and Beverly L. Clarke, candidates, respectively, of the American or knownothing and the democratic parties. The former was successful by a majority of 4,403. (See map no. 3.)

Viewed from the sectional standpoint it is interesting to note the exactness with which the new party had slipped into the strongholds of the old time whigs. This process of change can also be traced from the newspapers of the time. The Mercer county *Ploughboy*, for example, declares it is "no longer a secret that Sam has caught all the Whigs in the county but five and quite a number of the Democrats."²

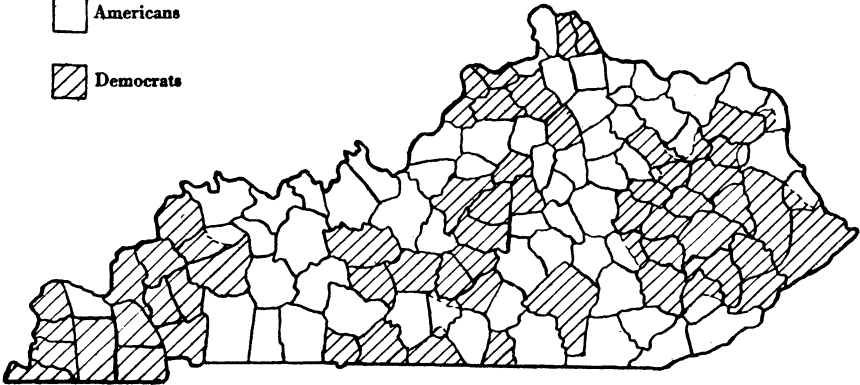
² Quoted in *Commonwealth*, February 2, 1855.

Sectionally the democratic counties increased considerably, especially in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. The *Commonwealth*, a leading organ of the American party, explained this change by saying that the people of the highlands "had not yet been reasoned with," and it promised that before another election "Sam" will have "visited and fully talked with the hardy mountaineers at their homes and firesides and when its polls shall again be opened they will vie with their brethren of the united midland and river shore, in rolling up majorities in vindication of the sentiment that Americans are able to rule their own country without foreign assistance."³

GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION, 1855

□ Americans

▨ Democrats



MAP NO. 3

In the election of 1855 the whigs had not put any ticket in the field, believing it would be better to go into a condition of "quiescence" or "armed neutrality," casting their vote wherever the guarantees for the country's good were best.

The strong hold that the know-nothing or American party had taken upon the population of Kentucky is one of the peculiar facts of its political history. The foreign element in the state was not large and the Roman church was neither overbearing nor disposed to interfere in the affairs of the people. A St. Louis paper, the *Intelligencer*,⁴ in urging the fitness of Kentucky to name the American candidate for the presidency in the coming election, based its opinion on that "perfect abandon" with which the state had given itself up to the new movement.

³ *Commonwealth*, August 20, 1855.

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, June 15, 1855.

The democrats were inclined to look on the situation as a "whig trick" and they persisted in calling it a bargain with the freesoilers and abolitionists of the north, and a desertion of the true interests of the south. This, in fact, was the leading issue of the campaign in Kentucky, and throughout its career in the state the American party was obliged to set forth its fidelity to southern interests, in many ways and at many times.

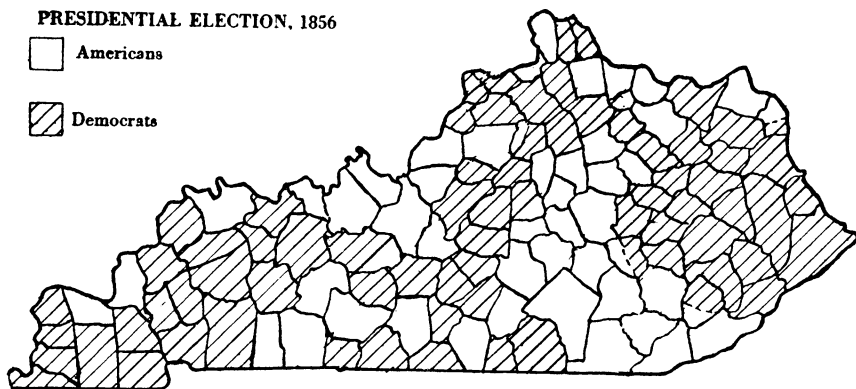
A fine expression of the spirit and sentiment which carried the election for the American party in 1855 is found in an address by Robert J. Breckinridge, in a paragraph in which he sums up the movement as follows: "What I behold is a vast and apparently spontaneous uprising of American nationality. Beneath that we behold the restoration of that primeval spirit of Protestant civilization in which the country itself was originally created; and still beneath that the renewal of that profound sense of overwhelming necessity of our national Union which was the grandest outbirth of our national revolution."⁵

Other issues of a more local nature figured in the grouping by parties and sections. These are indicated in the proceedings of the legislative assembly. An appropriation of \$5,000 a year for the colonization of negroes in Africa was a continuation of the whig policy in regard to slavery. Appropriations for agricultural fairs and asylums for the blind reflect little, if any, sectional significance. Such is not the case, however, with an effort to secure charters for several new banks in the state. The American party was in control of both houses of the legislature and it opposed an increase in the number of banks, on the ground that it would lead to an undue expansion of the currency. The democrats, on the other hand, true to their traditional attitude, favored the charters.

The election of 1856 was a contest between Fillmore and Buchanan for the presidency and resulted, in Kentucky, in a victory for the democratic candidate by a majority of 6,118. (See map no. 4.) The high hopes of the American party were thus blasted and its decline from this time on was rapid.

Several things contributed to bring about this result. Buchanan was a democrat of the Jacksonian type and popular for that reason. John C. Breckinridge, his running mate, was a

⁵ *Commonwealth*, May 4, 1855.



MAP No. 4

favorite son of Kentucky, a descendant of one closely associated with the origin of the resolutions of 1798 and possessed of personal qualities that made him popular with the people to a degree second only to Clay among the noted men of Kentucky. The acts of violence that had occurred in the election of 1855, particularly in Louisville on the "Black Monday," reacted to the detriment of the anti-foreign program. The Frankfort *Yeoman*, a democratic organ, had charged the American party with winning the election by "murder and arson."⁶ The distinctive doctrines of the party did not strike deep into the Kentucky mind and the leading advocate of the party complained in its columns that its platform was ignored entirely in the campaign of 1856, while the democrats fought against republican issues.⁷

In the general assembly which followed the election of 1856 the democrats were in control. In retaliation for the American opposition to the charter of new banks they now, in turn, opposed the recharter of those strong financial institutions of the state, which had established a sound currency, given stability to industrial conditions, and enabled the state to pass through the depression of 1857 without suspension of specie payment.⁸ In this assembly the subject of internal improvements was likewise a source of division. The *Commonwealth* in comment-

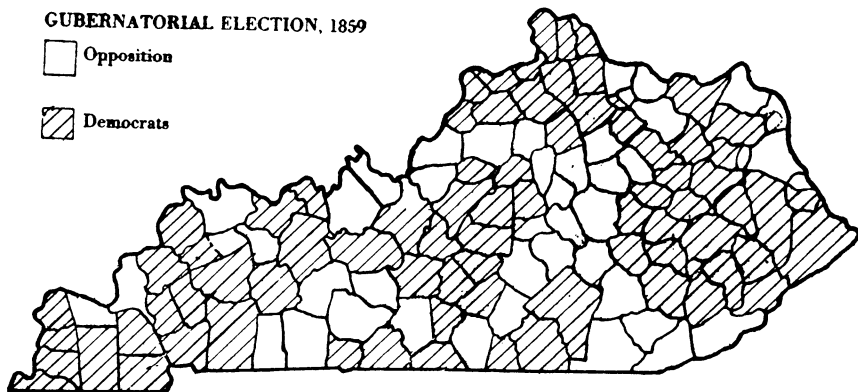
⁶ Quoted in *Commonwealth*, August 20, 1855.

⁷ *Ibid.*, March 21, 1857.

⁸ *Ibid.*, March 5, 1858.

ing on the situation declared that Kentucky was “languishing and loitering in the rear of her sister states merely for the want of internal improvements,” while the “Democracy resists every attempt to aid in their completion.”⁹

In its subsequent bearing on sectional grouping a significant feature of the election of 1856 was the nomination by the republicans of Kentucky of a complete state ticket. In this the American party rejoiced, on the ground that it would draw from the democracy of the mountains at least three thousand votes.¹⁰ The convention was held at the southern end of Madison county, just at the border between the blue grass and the mountains. The leaders of this growing party in Kentucky were acting on sectional principles when they looked for their constituency to that section of the state where economic conditions were least favorable to the plantation system and the institution of slavery. As early as 1845 the antislavery movement was under way; by 1850 an effort was made, under the leadership of Cassius M. Clay, to elect members to a constitutional convention for the purpose of removing slavery by legal amendment; and in 1851 Clay ran for governor of the state on the issue and secured about three thousand votes.



MAP No. 5

The election of 1859 was a contest for the governorship of the state between Beriah Magoffin and Joshua F. Bell, and resulted

⁹ *Commonwealth*, May 4, 1857.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, July 16, 1856.

in the election of the democratic candidate, Magoffin, by a majority of 8,904. (See map no. 5.) In this election the American issue was practically dead, and its place in the election was taken by the "opposition."

Sectionally considered, the democrats had made still further gains. That party was now coming to take a more conservative stand on the peculiar institutions of Kentucky and the south. The change was apparent, particularly in the central part of the state. In the more remote and poorer sections democracy was still loyal to its earlier principles. The statement of Mr. Shaler, in his *Kentucky*, that the election of 1859 is a conspicuous example of the influence of soil on political sentiment is a curious mixture of truth and error. He says: "The Democratic majority came mostly from the Blue Grass or wealthier districts of Kentucky; the counties on the poorer soils where the slave interest was small or non-existent, retained their resolutely hostile attitude to the leadership of the slave power."¹¹

As a matter of fact the poorer sections of the state contributed to the result of the election fully as much, if not more, than the richer ones. Sectional lines, it is true, were beginning to shift on the question of slavery and all that went with it, but there is reason to believe that many of the more remote counties of the state were still cherishing the principles of the Jacksonian democracy and perhaps, in some cases, those of the Jeffersonian brand, and were standing by it with singular fidelity. Pertinent to this point is a remark of the *Louisville Journal*, an organ of the opposition, in a warning to partisans deserting its ranks, to the effect that they must remember that democracy was changing and that the democracy of 1859 was no more to be compared to the democracy of Andrew Jackson than was night to day.¹²

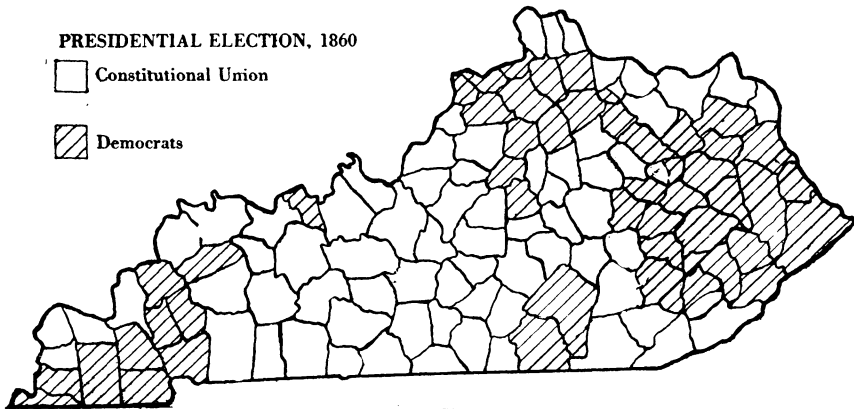
Successful as the democracy of 1859 had been, it is nevertheless true that it was in process of division from within. The Kansas-Nebraska bill, which a Kentucky paper had fittingly called that "sectional tornado," was dividing the democrats as it had divided the whigs. One section favored Douglas and joined the democrats of the north, while the other section gath-

¹¹ Nathaniel S. Shaler, *Kentucky, a pioneer commonwealth* (Boston, 1885), 232.

¹² *Louisville Journal*, July 30, 1859.

ered around Breckinridge in a stronger stand for the paramount interests of the south. Democratic newspapers became bitter in their expressions of hostility toward one another. The *Maysville Express*, for example, declared that the *Louisville Democrat*, a Douglas organ, was a greater menace to the welfare of the state than the opposition itself.¹³ The *Commonwealth*, seeing the opportunity that the situation offered, proclaimed: "A furious war is now raging in the ranks of Democracy and now is a favorable time to assail those who are at war among themselves."¹⁴

The election of 1860 was a contest among four tickets in the presidential race. (See map no. 6.) The constitutional union



party and its nominees, Bell and Everett, won the election in Kentucky by a vote of 14,180 over Breckinridge and a vote of 40,372 over Douglas. The latter did not carry a county in the state. The issue of union had been put to the front in the platform of the constitutional union party. "This party," said John J. Crittenden, "has arisen out of the troubles and dangers of the country for the protection and preservation of our institutions. . . This is, in my judgment, the party that is safest and most conservative."¹⁵

¹³ *Commonwealth*, March 19, 1858.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, November 18, 1859.

¹⁵ Ann M. B. (Crittenden) Coleman, *Life of John J. Crittenden, with selections from his correspondence and speeches* (Philadelphia, 1871), 2: 216.

Sectionally considered the issues of the growing storm had revived the spirit of nationalism and driven the democracy from the center of the state. At either end of the state it still held guard for the principle that the people of a state have a right to manage their own affairs.

In our time we have come to classify with a good deal of exactness the parties of 1860 with reference to the stand they took on union, states' rights, slavery, and secession. To one who reads the newspapers of the decade, however, the lines of cleavage are not so sharp and clear. The constitutional union party put union to the front, but it still desired to be known as favorable to the rights of the states; the Douglas democracy allied itself with the democracy of the north, but it never ceased to hold its loyalty to southern interests; the party of Breckinridge placed states' rights before everything else, but it did not go before the people as opposed to union. The *Louisville Courier*, an organ of the states' rights ticket, on the day before the election said that the victory of its candidates would bring "peace and quiet to the Union, . . . fresh impulse to industry and trade, . . . and patriotic effort to lengthen and strengthen the Union."¹⁶ Only upon such an interpretation of the Breckinridge ticket can we explain the vote of the counties in the mountain region where the people were lovers of liberty but never of secession.

The election of Lincoln created an issue of which many had long been thinking. As early as January, 1860, a banquet had been given in Louisville at which the governors of Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and Indiana had been present and taken part. The following are some of the toasts to which responses were made: "The Union it must be preserved;" "If treason to the Union shall prevail in the South or in the North, our noble state will stand between the sections as stood the people of old between the living and the dead to stay the pestilence."¹⁷

Robert J. Breckinridge, in a famous letter to John C. Breckinridge, wrote of the dissolution of the union: "It is the deliberate opinion of Kentucky that it is no remedy for anything whatever, and is in itself, the direst of calamities."¹⁸ Ten days

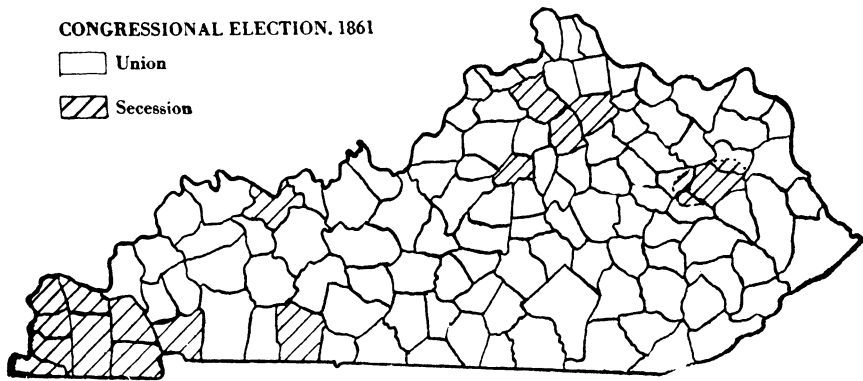
¹⁶ *Louisville Courier*, November 6, 1860.

¹⁷ *Commonwealth*, January 27, 1860.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, January 17, 1860.

after the election the governor of the state wrote to the editor of the *Yeoman*, the organ of his party: "What will Kentucky do and what ought she to do now that Lincoln is elected president?"

The efforts of Kentucky to harmonize the sections, by compromise measures; the effort to preserve a policy of neutrality and make it effective by a border state league, are not the subjects of this paper. By the logic of events it was only a few months before the one issue in Kentucky became union or secession. Every election from 1861 to 1864 hinged on that question, in some form, whatever the office to be filled might be. In 1861 there were three elections: one in May, to elect delegates to the border state convention; one in June, to select representatives to a special session of congress in July; and one in August, to elect members of the general assembly and a treasurer for the state.



MAP No. 7

Mr. Thomas Speed, in his book entitled *The union cause in Kentucky* regrets that so little attention has been paid to these elections.¹⁹ Discredit has been thrown upon them by charges of interference with the voting, of absence from the state or voluntary refusal to go to the polls.²⁰ The election of July registered a vote on both sides of 107,000 as compared with a vote of 146,000 in the presidential election preceding, which was the

¹⁹ Thomas Speed, *The union cause in Kentucky, 1860-1865* (New York, 1907), 87-98.

²⁰ *Commonwealth*, May 9, 1861.

largest vote ever polled in the state. (See map no. 7.) Of this election of July the *Commonwealth* says: "It is an expression of the people, the whole people, the sovereign people."²¹

Interpreted in the light of other elections of the war period involving the cause of union and of other evidences of the sentiment of the Kentucky population, the map may be taken as a fine tribute to the loyalty of the population of the state as a whole, and it comes as a reminder, in the midst of a paper on sectionalism, that there are issues so great in their character that they break over any lines that the physical features of a country may tend to produce.

The election contest of 1863 between Thomas Bramlette and Charles A. Wicliffe, for the governorship of the state, resulted in a majority of over 50,000 for Bramlette, the union candidate, on sectional lines very similar to those of 1861. The appropriation of money for the support of soldiers in Kentucky was the issue.

The issues of the war were responsible for the new party alignment that was rapidly coming to be made in the state. The *Lexington Observer* in summing up the change coming over the mountains said: "The Mountains are well nigh a unit against secession."²² To the same effect is a letter from Estill county in eastern Kentucky, which voices the opposition to the governor's call for a convention to submit the question to a vote in the words: "All the Mountains are against it." If the purpose is to keep Kentucky in the union it is not necessary, for "we are thank God already there," and if its purpose is to take Kentucky out of the union it is pernicious.²³ Rockcastle county, likewise, in a letter threatened to "rise en masse at the first efforts to precipitate Kentucky into the vortex of ruin."²⁴

The election of 1864 was the contest between Lincoln for a second term and McClellan, the candidate of the democratic party. The result was a victory for McClellan in Kentucky. This result is to be interpreted as a protest of the population against the interference of the federal government in the affairs

²¹ *Commonwealth*, June 26, 1861.

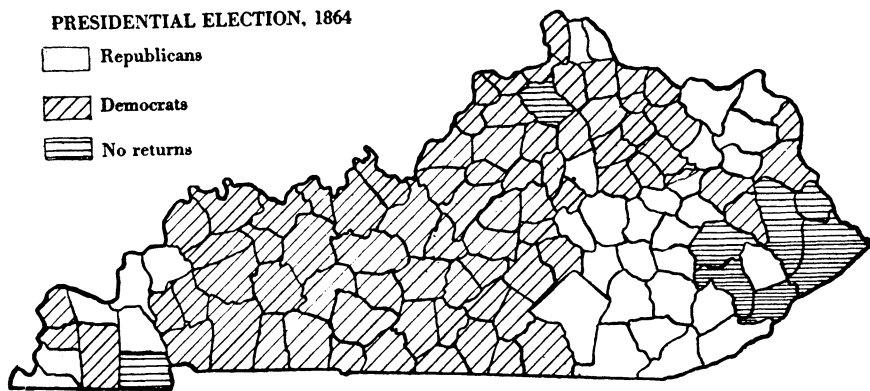
²² Quoted in *ibid.*, April 26, 1861.

²³ Quoted in *ibid.*, January 26, 1861.

²⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, May 13, 1861.

of the state. (See map no. 8.) The alignment of central Kentucky on the side of democracy was as rapid as that of the mountains on the side of republicanism.

The plea for an end to the war put forth by democracy; the law of expatriation, by which a citizen lost his rights as a penalty for encouraging or helping the enemy; the interference with the elections in the later years of the war; the enlistment of negroes in the army; the drafting of men into the army; the proclamation of emancipation, even with its clause of compensation to the border states; the restrictions on trade, with compulsory orders to sell products of plantations and farm to federal officers at prices set by themselves; the imprisonment or deportation of citizens for expressions of sympathy with the confederacy, are responsible for the reaction toward states' rights and the strengthening of the democratic majority.



MAP No. 8

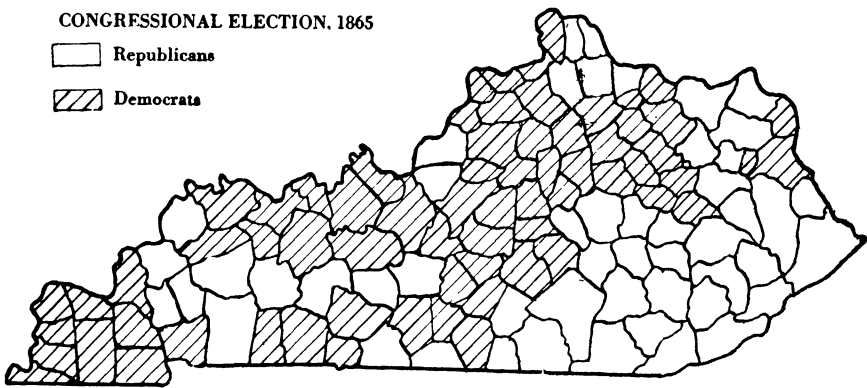
The governor of the state supported McClellan in the campaign and spoke in his behalf.²⁵ Even the old *Maysville Eagle*, which had heralded to the people so many years the doctrines of whig, American, and constitutional union, supported McClellan.²⁶ The spirit of the election which won for the democracy may be seen in an expression of an eminent jurist of the time who said, "If a recusant state should lay down its arms and submit to the national constitution as its supreme law, and

²⁵ *Commonwealth*, September 19, 1864.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, October 7, 1864.

nevertheless the war should still be waged against her for the unconditioned purpose of changing organic laws and institutions by force, I should expect that the true Union men in every state would repudiate such a policy."²⁷

The election of 1865 had for its purpose the selection of members of congress, particularly with reference to the passage of the thirteenth amendment, and the state registered its will against the measure by returning a democratic majority, though not so large as that of 1864. (See map no. 9.) Sectionally, the



MAP NO. 9

republicans had gained several counties, with some signs of recovering for the new party a foothold in the old whig strongholds.

We come to the close of our decade with sectionalism still apparent and following the lines of natural conditions of soil and location, but with party alignment largely reversed. Democracy now dominates the richer blue grass lands and the republican party controls the thinner and more remote sections of the state, especially in eastern Kentucky. It would be interesting if space permitted to mention in greater detail certain counties, like Morgan and Pulaski in eastern Kentucky, where the sectional action was rather peculiar; or the group of counties in the purchase which at times act contrary to expectation; or the hilly counties to the north of the blue grass.

In conclusion it may be said that political sentiment, as ex-

²⁷ *Commonwealth*, September 2, 1864.

pressed in election returns, did group itself along sectional lines, as it surged around the larger issues of the decade: union, states' rights, slavery, secession; and likewise around the more local issues of currency, internal improvements; and probably around many minor currents of opinion, feeling, and interest that this study has not revealed nor even discovered. We see that this grouping was related to the physical features of the country; that it shifted backward and forward over the counties that lay on the border between sections in the confusion of issues; that at times it broke entirely over sectional lines as some great issue came clearly before the people; that the alignment of political sentiment was reversed in the changes of the decade; and finally that the broadest generalization of sectional action portrays a population loyal, at the same time, to union and to states' rights, a phenomenon not remarkable when we remember the sectional location of Kentucky on the border between the group of states to the south and those to the north of the Ohio river.

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